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ABSTRACT

While researching the lives of well-known artists for a new unit in an art survey course, the instructor developed the idea of dressing in costume and presenting their lives in the first person. The primary goal of each lecture is to provide memorable information about the artist; a secondary goal is to integrate the social and political climate of the era. The enactments take the first part of the class period; the remainder is used to present examples of the artist's work and to distribute an outline of the lecture content. Evaluations suggest that the unusual presentations have significantly improved student retention. While this strategy is particularly useful in an art class, it is obvious that it also would be effective in other fields of study. The costume seems to be a key; this adds flavor to the lecture even if the instructor does not wish to present first-person characterizations. Props, sound effects, music, lights, and makeup would also add to the characterizations. Not only do these one-person mini-dramas give the students and instructor a break from traditional lecture techniques, they give students an unforgettable acquaintance with the abstract personalities in their reading material. (DC)

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Creative Alternative to Lecture

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PARLEY WITH THE PAST: CREATIVE ALTERNATIVE TO LECTURE

The idea of presenting characterizations of well-known artists occurred to me while researching a new unit for my Art Survey course. My research included Elizabeth Vigee-Lebrun's biography; as I read it, I could visualize the native attire and wooden shoes she wore for her disguise when she escaped death in Paris at the outset of the French Revolution. I was impressed by the terror she must have felt at that perilous moment in her life, and I wanted to help my students capture that same impression; I wanted to make these moments "live" for my students! So I decided to dress in costume and present the information in first person!

I first chose to present Vigee-Lebrun during her escape as she rode in a coach heading towards Italy with her young daughter and several fellow escapees. Her story unfolds as one of the passengers recognizes her, and they converse about her art career and her relationship with France's royal family. The inquisitive passenger and the artist's daughter are invisible in my presentation, but their unheard questions form the outline for my prepared responses. My repertoire soon grew to include characterizations of three other artists within this single unit--Mary Cassatt, Kathe Kollwitz, and Georgia O'Keeffe. All had lived intriguing lives and have become tremendously successful artists. The moments I chose from their lives, as from Vigee-Lebrun's, are expanded historically as well as dramatically. For example, I depict Cassatt as an assertive individual who is lecturing the student body of the Pennsylvania Art Academy, shortly after she has been awarded the prestigious gold medal from the institution. Kollwitz is portrayed during a nervous secret interview with a Russian reporter in which she provides first-hand insight into the treatment of German artists during the Nazi Regime. Touring a guest around her beloved New Mexico ranch occupies O'Keeffe as she relates her love of the natural beauty around her and explains how she incorporates this loveliness into her art.

The Characterizations

My role, essentially, is lecturer; but the lecture is presented in first person, and this unusual instructional mode decidedly changes the lecture's traditional format and tone. The primary goal is to provide memorable information about the artist. A lesser, but important goal is to integrate the social and political climate of each artist's era. I prepare for these characterizations by researching the artists' biographies, biographies of their friends or artistic associates, and appropriate historical data about the life and times. These data provide perspectives into the featured artists' characters, and the portrayal becomes more understandable and believable for the students. As well, I attempt to depict the artist's emotions, trying to imagine and then portraying how each person might have reacted during the circumstances I have chosen to include in my mini-drama.

Prior to class presentations, I rehearse the scheduled part: I get into costume approximately one hour prior to the presentation to allow myself time to "become" the artist; I rehearse the script and check dates, places, and names one last time.

The first-person enactments of these individual artists are completed during the first half of the hour-long class session. At the end of the first half hour, I signal to the students that I am coming out of character by removing one insignificant part of the costume or by telling them that I am stepping back into the role of instructor. The class is then provided with examples of the artist's work--filmstrips, slides, art prints, book illustrations, and originals from my personal collection. As well, an outline of the most pertinent information included in the characterization scenes is distributed to the class. This outline serves as a summary of the most significant material included in the instructional activities and later on as a review for examinations.

I strongly enforce prompt arrivals to class; it is important that all students are in the classroom prior to my making an entrance in order to avoid any interruption once I begin. As well, I acknowledge no questions or comments while enacting the character in order to provide as smooth and believable a performance as possible.

The "surprise" effect of my presentations in class is an added personal incentive to continue providing them. The students do not know that I will be presenting the curriculum unit in this manner until I appear as the artist. I do not introduce myself, but rather I simply begin dramatizing the circumstances that I have chosen from the artist's life. The additional efforts that I have made to "become" the artist makes the character more authentic to the students. Evaluations of student learning suggest that the unusual presentations have significantly improved student retention of the class "lecture."

Expanded Instructional Uses

While this strategy is particularly useful in my art course, it is obvious that other fields of study would find this alternative technique to be an effective instructional tool. Humanities, history, and science courses seem likely possibilities. Characters who come to mind are: Thomas Jefferson convincing his fellow patriots to approve his Declaration of Independence, Madame Curie explaining the magic of radiation to a group of students, and Henry David Thoreau sharing ideas about literature and the environment with a fellow writer. A variation on my own scheme of presenting several characters in any one unit could be to use a costumed "specialist" from the past to introduce a particular unit. The "specialist" could be the instructor, or a volunteer--perhaps a student in that class or another.

The costume seems to be a key; wearing costumes common to the historical period adds flavor to the lecture even if the instructor does not wish to present first-person characterizations. While they appear to be critical to the success of the performance, they do not have to be elaborate. Early on, I purchased some clothing from a local used clothing store and modified some clothing I already owned. When I decided to use this technique again the following year, I contacted the college's drama department and found suitable costumes to borrow. Because the characterizations have been so well received, I now have a seamstress constructing several easy-care, properly-fitted costumes.

I have recently begun to wonder how more elaborate props, sound effects or period music, lights, and makeup would add to classroom characterizations. At present I simply use chairs and a podium for props. I use no theatrical makeup, sound or light effects, or voice imitations. However, the positive effect of these possible additions to future characterizations are obvious.

Not only do these one-person mini-dramas give the students and the instructor a break from traditional lecture techniques, they give the students an unforgettable acquaintance with the abstract personalities in their reading material. Both unsolicited student comments and solicited evaluation responses regarding this unusual method of instruction have been overwhelmingly positive. Students have become more interested in art and in history; they participate more frequently and in greater numbers in class discussions. Some examples of solicited student evaluations follow:

> We were all seated waiting for class to begin when in strolled Mrs. Mitchell, dressed as a peasant, dragging along an imaginary daughter. She seated herself on a chair and began a dialogue with an imaginary person. We, as the audience, were informed about the complete life of Elizabeth Louise Vigee-Lebrun. She expressed the artist's fears, excitement and maternal feelings. We felt we knew the artist well at the end of her presentation.
>
> I feel that combining her solo acting skills and her knowledge of the woman artist was a super way to teach the class.
>
> Vicki Mitchell explains art history . . . for a short period of time she becomes Mary Cassatt or Elizabeth Louise Vigee-Lebrun. One is transported to the French Revolution or the Paris Art Academy, or Nazi Germany. What a wonderful way to see history, not just read about it. She is very convincing. Art History comes alive, naturally!

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To our readers: Responses to our recent "Call for Papers" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* are bringing us exciting descriptions of innovative teaching and learning practices and projects from the field (community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities). We are delighted with these responses because we find practitioner-generated abstracts to be our most popular issues. I urge you to help us in our efforts to showcase exemplary teaching practices in the community college arena. Please submit your own creative solutions to today's teaching problems. If you are uncertain about the appropriateness of the topic or merely wish to discuss some ideas for future submissions, please feel free to call or to put your questions/comments in writing. I promise a swift response! Thank you for your continuing support and thoughtful feedback. I look forward to hearing from you.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
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